

A Story Grammar Approach to Teaching EFL/ESL Literature

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review the story grammar approach to teaching and learning EFL/ESL literature. The paper presents the different reasons and benefits of using literature in EFL/ESL classrooms and the different approaches to teaching literature. The paper focuses on using the Story Grammar Approach. It describes in detail the structure and steps to be used in teaching literature. The paper ends with a review of EFL/ESL research conducted on using the Story Grammar Approach.

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Using literature in EFL/ESL teaching and learning

Literature has long been used as a source for reading materials in English as a first language (L1). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in utilizing literature in foreign language (FL) second language (SL) classrooms (Amer, 2003). In order to appreciate the benefits of using literature in these classes, the researcher presents a description of the Traditional second and foreign language classroom in which literature is absent.

The traditional foreign/second language classroom is teacher-centered, namely, the teacher dominates the instructional-educational process. The teacher is the organizer and the controller of all classroom activities and procedures. In this teacher- centered classroom, learners have no role since they are passive recipients of the teacher' instruction. Langer (1997, p. 613) states that learners do not have a chance to practice language through personal and meaningful engagement and are often limited to studying language in texts through low-level literal questions. In most classes, they are exposed to short texts and fill in exercises meant to develop

their language skills before being provided with context that allows them to use those skills in personal and real-life situations.

Literature plays a fundamental role in our life. It helps us reflect on our lives, values, and culture. Besides, literature helps us explore other cultures and reflect on the similarities and differences between our culture and theirs. In other words, literature opens to us various angles of vision to re-examine our beliefs, thinking, and life.

Recent research explains the various benefits of using literature in L2 learning (Cho, et al., 2005; Hess, 2006). Literature provides L2 learners with a combination of pleasurable, comprehensible, authentic linguistic input and a low affective filter (Krashen, 2004). This will help learners to develop a positive attitude towards EFL/ESL reading, which, in turn, enhances their reading motivation and engagement. Using literature in the classroom creates a positive motivational climate in the classroom that enhances learners' intrinsic reading (Morrow, 2004). This is likely to lead to increasing independent reading (Kim, 2004).

Literature presents a rich source of vocabulary. Learners show increase in vocabulary size and awareness of the interrelationships among words (Wang and

Guthrie, 2004). Dixon-Krauss (2002) and Holden (2003) reviewed research that investigated the effect of literary text context on vocabulary development. They concluded that the vast majority of learned words did not come from direct instruction but were learned incidentally through exposure to literary texts.

Collie and Slater (1990, p. 3) state that there are four reasons for using literature in the classroom:

1. valuable authentic material
2. cultural enrichment
3. language enrichment
4. personal involvement

In addition, literature can enhance L2 learners ‘critical thinking skills (Butler, 2006). Exposure to literature in the classroom provides learners with meaningful opportunities to reflect on concepts, recognize real life problems, explore causes and solutions, and compare their values and life styles with other cultures. This can provide teachers and learners, in the language classroom, with an authentic and rich context for discussion about their cultural values and traditions in contrast with other cultures. This, in turn, may encourage learners to avoid ethnocentrism and develop intercultural competence.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, an important reason for using literature in language classrooms is its sociolinguistic richness. Literature offers genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers, and text-types at different levels of difficulty (Duff and Maley, 2007, p. 6). Literature reflects the linguistic features of the social classes and the geographical areas of the culture. People speak differently in different situations, occasions, and places (i.e. formal, informal, dialects, colloquial, etc.).

According to Van (2009), studying literature in the EFL classroom is in line with CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) principles:

- a) Meaning is the outcome of the interaction between the reader's experience on the one hand, and the text's language, the reading context and the ideological assumptions underlying the text on the other. Accordingly, literature can enhance meaning.
- b) Learning is facilitated through engagement and anxiety-free classroom environment.
- c) Learning is facilitated through authentic communication activities and active involvement. As such, literature can be particularly useful as it provides opportunities for student-centered activities and collaborative group work.

d) The role of learners as active and autonomous participants is emphasized in CLT, and as literature reading creates individual meanings, this goal is achieved.

In conclusion, literature opens to students various angles of vision to re-examine their beliefs, thinking, and life. Literature provides L2 students with a combination of pleasurable, authentic sociolinguistic input and a low affective filter.

Approaches to Teaching Literature

Wallek and Warren (1984) distinguished between two approaches to teaching literature: The intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic approach focuses specifically on the linguistic characteristics and structure of the text. This approach organizes texts into four levels:

- a) The grammatical level: organization of units of expression at both sentential and discursive levels.
- b) The lexical level: denotations and connotations of words also covering register, style, figurative language, etc.
- c) The structural level: narrative, argumentative and symbolic features describing rhyme, rhythm, cohesion and coherence at the discursive level.

d) The cultural level: transmission of messages from the texts to the readers and their relevance in a particular socio-cultural context.

The extrinsic approach, in contrast, seeks to go deeper into the social, political or historical events, which constitute the framework of the text.

Following Carter and Long's (1996) classification (cited in Carter, 2007), Lima (2005) presented two main approaches to teaching literature: intuitive analysis and syntactic analysis. These two approaches are quite similar to Carter and Long's Personal Growth and Language Approaches. Hence, literary and cultural aspects of the texts are put aside, giving preference to such phenomena as language organization and readers' responses. The Intuitive analysis approach focuses on readers' spontaneous response to the text, demystifying literature and connecting it to individual experience. In contrast, the Syntactic analysis approach explores the linguistic characteristics and organization of the text.

An Australian group of scholars (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012) developed the Tasmanian's Integrative Model (2012). Though initially intended for L1 classes only, this could also make a promising model for EFL. In the Tasmanian Model, literary texts are to be approached not only from a

linguistic point of view, but also from a social, cultural, and a literary perspective.

These approaches are

- a) The Cultural Heritage Perspective supports the view that literature embodies the history, tradition, wisdom and beliefs of a particular society.
- b) The Language Skills Perspective considers students to work with texts for reading, writing, listening and speaking skill acquisition.
- c) The Personal Growth Perspective defends the idea that language learning is a holistic, natural process in which students constantly build meaning. This perspective is closely related to the Reader Response theory, which supports the active role of the reader learners.
- d) The Functional Perspective focuses on the analysis of the grammatical structures of language and the identification of the relation existing among language form, register, and context. This also gives students control over a repertoire of language forms, and therefore over meaning making and interpretation.
- e) The Critical Literacy Perspective views texts as social constructs reflecting the beliefs and values of their time and culture. Working with literary texts is not only good for students to acquire the basic language skills, but also to explore the historical, cultural and social contexts in which texts are created and

interpreted. This contributes positively to their personal and psychological evolution.

The Story Grammar Approach

Story Grammar is based on the conceptualization that readers should be consciously aware of text structure. “Text structure” is a term used to describe the various patterns of how concepts within text are related. Two important types of text structure are narrative and expository. Narrative texts tell a story and are the type usually found in literature selections. Expository texts provide information and facts and are the type usually found in science and social studies selections. The types are organized differently, so that readers must use their comprehension processes differently when reading these different types of texts. Hence, learners need to be taught how to read different types of text. They need to learn different strategies for different text types (Beach and Appleman, 1984, p.116).

Research indicates that awareness of text structures is highly related to reading comprehension. Readers who understand how a text is structured “find greater success in identifying important information and relationships between ideas” (Hall et al 2005, 215). Also, language instruction, which focuses on facilitating awareness of narrative text structure, is associated with improved comprehension (Hogan, Bridges, Justice, & Cain, 2011). Narrative text structure is very predictable. It contains one main structural pattern, sometimes referred to as a story grammar, which involves an understanding of setting, characters, problem, solution, and resolution in a story (Harp & Brewer, 2005). The story grammar provides a framework of understanding for narrative text.

A story grammar represents the basic structure of a narrative text. It is the system of rules used for describing the consistent features found in narrative texts. These rules describe the story parts, arrangement of the parts, and how the parts are related, i.e. the internal structure of the story. Cognitive Load Theory suggests that the story grammar framework can act as a schema for building a complete story. Story grammar elements include the characters, setting, initiating event, internal response, plan, attempt, consequence, and resolution of a story (Miller 2013: 26).

A simple conceptualization of story grammar is presented by Cooper (1986: 270-271). According to this model, a story may be composed of several different “episodes”, each consisting of “a setting, characters, a problem, action and resolution of the problem”. The *setting* is the place and time at which the story occurs. The *characters* are the people or animals that carry out the action. The *problem* is the situation around which an episode is organized. The *action* is what happens, or what characters do, as a result of the problem; it is made up of *events* that lead to the solution of the problem, which is called the *resolution*. A story has a *theme*: the basic idea about which the whole story is written, or the lesson the reader learns at the end of the story. By identifying these elements, the reader identifies the story’s grammar. Direct instruction in story grammar involves helping learners to recognize the elements of narrative text and use these elements to improve their comprehension of the story.

Research on Story Grammar

Herawati (2018) investigated the effect of using story grammar strategy on Indonesian students’ reading comprehension. Participants were 69 tenth grade students divided into two groups: experimental group comprised 35 students and

control group comprised 34 students. The experimental group received story grammar-based instruction for 90-minute 14 sessions. Unfortunately, the researcher did not mention the name of the story used in the study. The tool of the study was a pre-post reading comprehension test. Results showed a significant statistical difference between the two groups in favour of the experimental group indicating the effectiveness of the story grammar strategy in developing students' reading comprehension.

Chuang and Wang (2015) investigated how contextual story grammar mapping instruction with Reading-While-Listening (RWL) impacts on Taiwanese sixth graders' listening comprehension. The subjects participating in this study included 40 sixth graders (23 boys and 17 girls). The experiment lasted for 21 weeks. The intervention consisted of nine sessions and was conducted for 40 minutes a week for each group. Nine stories were used in the study. Flesch-Kincaid index was used to measure the readability and difficulty level of the selected nine stories. The story levels were all below level two, considered relatively easy for sixth graders starting formal EFL English lessons at grade three.

During the intervention, the experimental group was treated with contextual story grammar mapping instruction in the mode of RWL. In contrast, RWL with oral rendition was implemented within the lessons of the control group. The instruments of the study consisted of an English learning background questionnaire, English listening and reading proficiency pretests and achievement posttests, nine immediate listening comprehension tests, and an attitude questionnaire for the experimental group.

The results of the study attest that RWL combined with contextual story grammar mapping improves students' listening comprehension and enhances their reading proficiency. Participants in the experimental group showed positive attitudes towards the method of teaching the stories. A significant finding was that there was a positive correlation between listening comprehension and reading achievement.

Bilal, et al (2013) examined the effectiveness of the short story-assisted program on eighth grade students' reading comprehension. Participants were 20 eighth grade students at a school at a Pakistan International School in Qatar. They were divided into two groups: experimental and control. A teacher trained in teaching literary text instruction and the short story program taught the experimental group. He taught students the basics of literary texts and short story grammar. The teacher in the control group used the normal textbook prescribed by the school with no instruction in literary texts. Instruction in the two groups lasted four weeks. Two instruments were used in the study: a reading comprehension Pretest-Posttest and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to elicit students' attitudes towards the short story-assisted reading comprehension. The data obtained from the two instruments was analyzed using descriptive statistics and t- tests. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group indicating the effectiveness of the short story-assisted program on students' reading comprehension.

Amer (1992) investigated the effect of story grammar on six-grade EFL Egyptian students on their reading comprehension of a narrative text. Students were divide into two groups: experimental ($N= 37$) and control ($N= 33$). Students had been

studying EFL for six years. The story used in the study was *The Bottle Imp* by Howe (1987). Students had to study the story as part of the English syllabus. The story consists of ten chapters divided into five episodes. Instruction lasted seven 50- minute session; two sessions per week.

In the experimental group, each episode was introduced in one session. The teacher asked students to prepare the chapters for each episode. The teacher provided students with guiding questions, which aimed at drawing their attention to the structure of the episode. In the classroom, the teacher asked students to read certain parts of the episode, which brought out the elements of the episode. This was followed by answering te guiding questions and discussing the structure of the episode. The seventh session was devoted to relating the episodes to each other and developing the theme of the story. The teacher of the control group asked students to prepare chapters at home. In the classroom, she asked them to read some parts silently. Then, she asked them some comprehension questions.

Two pre-post instruments were used to measure the students' comprehension of the story. The first was a reading comprehension test and the second was a story frame. Result indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group. This showed that story grammar and guiding questions that bring out the elements of story structure helped students abstract the episodic sequence of the story.

Conclusion

Benefits of using literature in EFL/ESL teaching and learning include promoting not only reading ability and motivation but also enhancing other language skills. In

addition, integrating literature into EFL/ESL reading can create a learning environment that will provide comprehensible input and a low affective filter. Through exposure to EFL/ESL literature, students are exposed to other cultures' ways of life. Research shows that the Story Grammar Approach is an effective instructional approach to teaching stories/narrative texts.

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